

Literacy for All: A Neglected “EFA” Goal?¹

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This paper attempts to address reasons that Literacy for All and thus Education for All (EFA) may be such difficult goals to achieve and explores strategies to address them by examining the action plans submitted by 28 countries to UNESCO in preparation for the High-Level International Round Table on Literacy that took place as a closing event for the UN Literacy Decade at the UNESCO Headquarters in September 2012. This paper first reviews progress in adult literacy, along with other EFA goals, since the 2000 Dakar Forum and then analyzes challenges and strategies toward the attainment of universal adult literacy in the context of EFA. The paper is concluded with a discussion toward solutions.

Keywords: adult literacy, literacy for all, education for all, UNESCO

¹ Universal adult literacy, unlike universal primary education, is not an EFA goal. EFA Goal 4 related to adult literacy (everyone aged 15 and over) aims at achieving a 50% reduction in adult illiteracy rates by 2015, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction of the Problem

EFA is a global movement aimed at providing quality basic education for all children, youth, and adults. The movement was launched during the World Conference on EFA in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. In order to scale up efforts toward the achievement of EFA, the six EFA goals were adopted at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2000: 1) Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education; 2) Ensuring that by 2015 all children have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality; 3) Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through appropriate learning and life skills programs; 4) Achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy (i.e., a 50% reduction in adult illiteracy rates) by 2015 and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults; 5) Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015; and 6) Improving every aspect of the quality of education (UNESCO, 2000).

Upon closer examination of the statistical numbers related to the EFA goals with specific deadline targets (i.e., universal primary education, gender equality, and adult literacy), net enrolment (Goal 2) and gender parity (Goal 5) have made considerable progress since 2000. The net enrolment rate (NER: the number of children of the school-aged population enrolled at school as a percentage of the total number of school-aged children) improved from 83.8% in 2000 to 89% in 2010 and the gender parity index (GPI: the ratio of girls to boys in school) at the primary level improved from 0.94 in 2000 to 0.98 in 2010 (UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2012). While the other goals have made progress, albeit

without reaching full achievement, the progress in adult literacy has slowed (UNESCO, 2011). Failure to improve adult literacy by halving adult illiterate rates by 2015 (Goal 4) has severely impacted EFA. Given that literacy “is a basic learning need and a key learning tool integral to achieving all the EFA goals” (Lind, 2008: 59) and “literacy for all lies at the heart of EFA” (UNESCO, 2009: 4), EFA can never truly be quality education for all, despite its nominal implication without tackling the problem of adult literacy.

This paper first reviews the progress on the adult literacy since the 2000 Dakar Forum. It analyzes challenges facing the realization of adult literacy benchmarks and strategies to address these challenges based on the action plans submitted by 28 countries to UNESCO in preparation for the High-Level International Round Table on Literacy “Reaching the 2015 Literacy Target: Delivering on the Promise” that took place at the UNESCO Headquarters on 6 and 7 September 2012 and attracted over 200 participants from 41 countries, including 14 Ministers. This conference was a closing event for the United Nations Literacy Decade proclaimed by the UN General Assembly and officially launched in 2003. This paper concludes with a discussion toward solutions

2. Progress in adult literacy since 2000

Literacy is an essential skill toward better academic performance and/or socioeconomic success. Literacy is a source of empowerment, equity, and opportunity to participate in civil activities globally and locally, as Freire (1970) describes: reading the word is reading the world. Literacy is also a social entitlement, a determinant of well-being, and a goal of human development (Maddox, 2008; Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1999).

Despite its importance, promoting adult

literacy has been a difficult task. Although the adult literacy rate (ALR) improved by 4.4% from 79.9% to 84.1% between 2000 and 2010 (UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2011), these numbers may be deceiving in reality as they do not necessarily refer to adults becoming more literate but may refer instead to young literates joining the adult pool. Given that the number of years of schooling an individual has had is often the method for measuring literacy, it is estimated that a large part of the ALR increase derives from youth literacy (15-24 years old) improvement; that is those who were previously under 15 years old and who went to school and acquired literacy skills are now over 15 and count as adult literates.

According to my calculation based on the World Population Prospects (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2011), there were approximately 4.281 billion adults (aged 15 or over) in 2000 and 5.11 billion adults in 2010. This indicates that the adult population increased by 0.829 billion between 2000 and 2010. Since the adult literacy rate was 79.7% in 2000 and 84.1% in 2010, the number of adult literates was estimated to be 3.411 billion in 2000 and 4.292 billion in 2010, which indicates that the number of adult literates increased by 0.881 billion during that period. If it is assumed that these young adults received formal education and are considered literate by current literacy standards, at least over 70% of the gain in ALR is attributed to these young adults who have gone through education systems rather than adult learners who were previously considered illiterate and have become literate through adult literacy programs.² In other words, the increase in ALR largely stems from the increase in NER.

² While not all current young adults have received and/or finished formal primary schooling, both school enrolment rate and survival rate to the last grade of primary education had been close to 90% or surpassed 90% in the 2000s (UNESCO, 2012).

While more and more younger generations have become literate, the majority of adult illiterates at the time of the Dakar Forum may still remain illiterate. Other than implementing sporadic adult literacy programs or campaigns (Oxenham, 2008), EFA stakeholders tend to rely exclusively on formal primary education for literacy improvement by sending “future adults” to school (Ahmed, 2011). This suggests that the second part of EFA Goal 4—equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults—lags behind achievement. Why is it so difficult to make adult illiterates become literate? The next section will review issues that may hinder the improvement of adult literacy.

3. Literature Review

This section reviews literature discussing impediments to achieving adult literacy, including a lack of commitment at the policy and the application level; scarce financial resources; failure to reach marginalized illiterates; too many language choices; population growth; the absence of coherent language policies and planning, and coordination and partnership mechanisms; challenging process of monitoring and evaluation; and low quality of literacy programs. The issue of a lack of commitment to literacy has been addressed by various scholars. Robinson (2005), for example, examined how literacy has been treated by international organizations, national governments, and other EFA stakeholders and concluded that adult literacy was not a focus of action among them. Lind (2008) reviews stakeholders’ motivations for and against literacy and argues that “adult literacy has de facto been neglected in actual strategies and resource allocation” (20). Oxenham (2008) argues that EFA affords adult literacy a lower priority than primary education because while EFA Goal 2 on primary education

pursues universal access, Goal 4 related to adult literacy pursues a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015 (UNESCO, 2000: 72). The 2011 Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2011) describes literacy as a forgotten EFA goal—few EFA stakeholders are committed to promoting literacy—and also concludes that achieving a breakthrough in literacy requires national governments' as well as other stakeholders' commitment, which relates directly to a lack of education budget for adult literacy that is often less than one percent (Oxenham, 2008).

The infeasibility of developing successful projects in reaching out to the marginalized, such as rural populations, indigenous peoples, nomads, the disabled, people in conflict-affected areas, including refugees, and females. Although rural populations are more disadvantaged with fewer resources than their counterparts in urban areas, they generally receive less support (Lester, 2012). In adult literacy training, however, those who could expect to benefit the most are rural farmers (Oxenham, 2008). Literacy rates among indigenous populations remain low in many countries in part because few programs are available in their languages (McKenna and Fitzpatrick 2004). Nomads are often excluded from formal education partly due to their life style and end up being illiterate (UNESCO, 2008). The disabled may be one of the most disadvantaged majority as over 90% of disabled children in developing countries do not attend school and their literacy rate is as low as 3% (UNESCO, 2008). Another major obstacle to achieving literacy for all is the high proportion of countries that are experiencing or have recently emerged from conflicts. Violence and instability may mean that entire groups miss out on the chance to develop literacy skills (UNESCO, 2011). Improving female literacy is a matter of urgency as two-thirds of adult illiterates are female. According to UNESCO

(2006; 2008), the percentage of female illiterates has remained the same since the 1980s.

The language of instruction for literacy programs is also a complicating factor in adult literacy development (UNESCO, 2006). The majority of countries worldwide are bilingual or multilingual (Crystal, 2003). While a variety of languages may be used daily for unofficial purposes, one or two languages of high variety that are socially more powerful than others are often used for official domains such as public administration and education (Baker, 2006). Indeed, acquiring literacy in the dominant languages is essential for formal schooling, political participation, and community activities. The language gap between official and unofficial languages causes a number of problems that often leave minority language speakers linguistically, educationally and socioeconomically disadvantaged (Wagner 2003). Among language experts, there is general consensus that education should be received in learners' mother tongues to best enhance their academic performance (Brisk, 2006; Bühmann and Trudell, 2008; Cummins and Schecter, 2003; Tse, 1999). Yet, given the complexity of language landscapes, it is implausible to provide education in everyone's native language.

Population growth has a negative impact on improving literacy. Even if the adult literacy rate is increasing in many parts of the world, in some regions, the absolute numbers of illiterate adults continue to rise as schools have difficulty in providing a large number of students with quality education (Lind, 2011). Such regions often have an absence of clear and coherent literacy policies and/or planning, and the process of monitoring and evaluation (Rogers, 1999). As Ahmed (2011: 182) argues, "the inherent weaknesses in assessment and measurement of literacy, together with the consequent policy and program deficiencies, have put in jeopardy the achievement of all six 2015 EFA goals." A lack

of adequate coordination mechanisms leads to waste of resources and/or failure to attract funding. The absence of monitoring and evaluation systems are associated with the low quality of literacy programs (UNESCO, 2008).

Some of these challenges crash over each other. A lack of commitment at the policy level is directly related to insufficient financial resources, which affects other literacy issues such as reaching out the marginalized and providing the quality of literacy programs. Coordination and partnerships mechanisms can generate or attract funding, and monitoring and assessment can help spend funding effectively by identifying effective and ineffective literacy programs and activities.

While the literature review introduced literacy issues, it does not tell how prevalent those issues are throughout the world. The next section will examine challenges and strategies in the action plans for improving literacy submitted to

UNESCO in preparation for the High-Level International Round Table on Literacy that took place at the UNESCO Headquarters on 6 and 7 September 2012 and attracted over 40 countries, including 14 Ministers.

4. Challenges and Strategies Toward Improving Literacy

This section examines challenges and strategies in the action plans for improving literacy submitted to UNESCO in preparation for the High-Level International Round Table on Literacy held at the UNESCO Headquarters in September 2012. While the literature review introduced literacy issues, it does not tell how prevalent those issues are throughout the world. Based on the action plans, therefore, the challenges and strategies different countries working toward improving literacy are tabled and analyzed.

4.1 Challenges toward Improving Literacy

Table 1. Challenges toward improving literacy

	Challenges	Number of Countries
1	Insufficient financial and human resources	18
2	Lack of quality teachers and facilitators	12
3	Lack of commitment at the policy level	11
4	Lack of commitment at the application level	9
4	Regional disparity	9
4	Weak institutional capacity in literacy programs	9
7	Difficulty in conducting monitoring and evaluation	8
8	Insecurity	7
8	Weak coordination and partnership mechanisms	7
8	Gender disparity	7
8	Lack of literacy environments	7
12	Poverty	6
13	Lack of nonformal education infrastructure	5
13	High dropout rates from formal schooling	5
13	Low attendance/retention rates	5
16	Unavailability of reliable statistics	4
16	Insufficient post-literacy programs for neo-literates	4

16	Lack of relevance	4
19	Low level of recognition, validation, and certification in adult literacy programs	4
19	Lack of the institutionalization of national language	4

The challenge that countries presented as the most prevalent in their action plans is insufficient financial and human resources (18/28 countries). With regard to financial resources, The action plan of Iran highlights a concern about inappropriate “provision and allocation of the required funds” while Togo’s plan indicates that the government officials are apprehensive of “dependence on external funding.” The action plan of Burkina Faso reveals a difficulty in mobilizing “financial resources for the non-formal education” including adult literacy programs. At any event, as stated in the action plans of Central African Republic and Yemen, the government does not allocate enough budgets for literacy and a financing gap to be filled exists for improving literacy.

As to human resources, the action plan of Pakistan reports, “[Especially] at the provincial level, very limited professional support staff exists to implement literacy policies, plans and programs effectively.” The Pakistan’s plan continues, “Due to lack of professional and inadequate resources, the existing literacy programs will not meet the requirements of the future literacy programs in the next decades.” The action plan of Papua New Guinea also points out the country’s need for increasing the number of qualified administrators and trainers in literacy programs.

As touched upon above, human resources include teachers and facilitators of literacy programs. Indeed, a lack of quality teachers and facilitators is the second most common problem that countries noted. The action plan of Mozambique, for example, identifies “inadequate training for literacy educators” as a

main cause for the dropout of learners from literacy programs. The action plan of Pakistan demonstrates the country’s “lack of trained and professional program staff for literacy and non-formal basic education at provincial and district level,” but “there is no institutionalized system or core professional organization to provide the training needs.”

A lack of commitment at both the policy level and the application level are serious issues to be addressed. According to the action plan of the Central African Republic states, the country’s government officials show little interest in adult literacy largely because “literacy is not perceived as a development policy.” The action plan of Pakistan also states that a “lack of political will was observed in the implementation of literacy and non-formal education programs. Funds were sanctioned but politicians could not provide leadership and these programs were caught by politicization during different time periods.” Along with a lack of political commitment, the motivation of adult literacy learners has been a matter of serious concern. The action plan of Iraq reports “weak community awareness about the seriousness of illiteracy as a phenomena” and of “the benefits of literacy programs.”

Wide regional disparity is also a serious issue. In general, adult illiterates in rural areas and conflict areas tend not to be provided with sufficient opportunities to learn literacy. In Sierra Leone, for example, poor road conditions prevent monitoring and supervising literacy programs in remote rural areas, especially during the rainy seasons. In Iraq, there are few or no schools at all in certain areas due to armed conflicts.

The issue of weak institutional and organizational capacity in literacy programs was raised by quite a few countries. In Benin, for example, a “lack of organizational structure for recruitment and human resource management in literacy and education” leads to inadequate and insufficient trainers and administrators in literacy programs. Bangladesh also appears to have “weak institutional and organizational capacity [as] an obstacle for building literacy/NFE [nonformal education] initiatives.” Some countries seem to have difficulty in conducting monitoring and evaluation properly. Pakistan claims that “monitoring and evaluation of the literacy and NFBE [nonformal and basic education] programs could not be carried out regularly at the grass root level due to lack of human and financial resources.”

Several countries mention insecurity as an impediment for literacy learners to attend classes. Iraq, for example, reports that “Security instability on many occasions” prevent literacy learning opportunities. Some other countries in conflict such as Chad and Burkina Faso have similar security problems.

A weak coordination and organizational structure makes it difficult to provide “clear roles and frameworks for partners,” as reported in the action plan of Iraq where there appears to be a “lack of coordinated action amongst stakeholders, including the Government of Iraq, civil society, NGOs and the private sector.” For instance, some ministries attempt “to educate their illiterate members without coordination with MOE [Ministry of Education].” The plan concludes, “In the absence of an umbrella for coordinating work among all parties, funding remains scattered between civil society organizations and governmental institutions.” Wide gender disparity hinders improving literacy. In general, women are at disadvantage in literacy acquisition. In Chad, “86% of illiterates are women.” In Indonesia, over 70% of the total

illiterates are women. As the action plan of Mozambique dictates, “The main challenge was the retention of the learners, especially women. Many girls and women face constraints to continue their studies due to their social, economic, and cultural role in the family.”

Lack of literate environments negatively affects literacy acquisition for illiterates and retention for new literates. In Eritrea, for example, there appears to be a concern about “uneven access of information due to the current illiterate environment in large areas of the country (especially in remote areas)” and “the risk of relapsing into illiteracy (for most literacy centers are located in totally illiterate environments).”

Poverty may also lead to low attendance of literacy programs because potential learners have to work to make a living rather than attending literacy classes. In Cambodia, for example, “many, including children, cannot afford to leave their work in order to attend full time studies.” The action plan of Iraq also reports, “the deteriorating economic situation of Iraqi households” does not allow adult illiterates to enroll in literacy programs.

A lack of nonformal education infrastructure may affect improving both access to and the quality of literacy programs. The action plan of Pakistan reports that “since the number of federal government literacy centers is very limited, access remains a big issue.” The Cambodian plan also states, “most areas of the country lack adequate numbers of school and/or a complete range of classes and teachers.”

High dropout rates from formal schooling may generate illiteracy. In Chad, “the large number of out-of-school children between 9 and 14” affects improving literacy. Iraq also has a similar issue: “the continuous flow of illiterates due to the dropout of students from formal education.”

Low attendance/retention rates of literacy

programs was also mentioned by several countries. Some varying reasons cited for the low attendance/retention rate of literacy programs included the nomadic life style of learners (e.g., Eritrea, Guinea and Mali) and insecurity (e.g., Burkina Faso, Chad and Iraq). Unavailability of reliable statistics makes stakeholders unable to capture the whole picture of literacy situations and to address the existing issues. Niger, for example, seems to have “difficulties in collection, processing and analysis of data on LNFE [literacy and nonformal education]” while the Cambodian plan claims that the obtained statistics are imprecise.

The issue of insufficient post-literacy programs for neo-literates needs to be addressed. For example, Chad’s literacy programs lack “reflection about the development of post literacy.” The Mexican plan indicates the country’s concern about its “insufficient program quality for neo-literates that tend to relapse into illiteracy.” The action plan of the Central African Republic also demonstrates that the current literacy programs do not take the post-literacy into account.

Questions of relevance (4/28) are crucial in identifying of literacy skills and motivating learners. In Pakistan, “relevance of the literacy program failed to attract illiterates because the literacy course contents did not match the demand of local communities and had negligible productive value for the literacy graduates.” The Eritrean plan states that question of the relevance of meeting learning needs could be the cause of poor attendance and drop outs. Iraq also claims that it “need[s] to develop a thorough curriculum for literacy that is relevant for targeted beneficiaries.”

Low level of recognition, validation, and certification in adult literacy and NFE (3/28) was indicated as a problem by some countries. The Gambian plan reports that continuing “low

levels of recognition, validation and certification in adult literacy and NFE” discourages learners from enrolling in literacy programs and staying in the literacy programs. In Pakistan, “No equivalence of certification has been notified by the relevant authority. As such, students qualified through literacy/NFBE centers have been facing numerous problems regarding their admissions in regular stream and post literacy employment.”

The lack of the institutionalization of national language was also noted (3/28). The action plan of Togo suggests the country’s “absence of a policy for the promotion of national languages.” The Eritrean plan also reveals its “lack of varied and adequate reading materials in mother tongues.”

The action plans submitted by 28 countries indicate that insufficient financial and human resources is the most common challenge against improving literacy. This is followed by the low quality of literacy programs, including that of teachers/facilitators. A lack of commitment was also stated often. The insufficient financial and human resources, quality of literacy programs, and the lack of commitment are related as the lack of commitment leads to insufficient funding, which affects securing sufficient quality human and technical resources for improving literacy. All of these issues are touched upon in the literature review section, and as explained there, they are all interwoven. Many governments claimed that they do not have enough funding for literacy and have to rely on external funding from international community. Yet, since more and more countries have become wealthier, it is possible that the governments are not counted to the extent that they take actions. As the action plan of the Central African Republic said, for example, the issue is not only financial but political—literacy is not integrated in development policies. It is obvious that a lack of financial supports affect human and thus

technical resources for literacy.

Apart from lack of financial, human, and technical resources, as well as a lack of commitment at the policy and the application level, regional disparity can be categorized in reaching out the marginalized. There seem to be issues ranked low but considered important. According to a UNESCO program specialist, the issue of lack of relevance and low level of recognition should be cited more from his

experiences of interacting with ministers, senior officials and education experts from these 28 countries. The lack of the institutionalization of national languages is related to the issue of the choice of the language of instruction. Literacy is measured in official languages, and national languages and/or native languages of adult learners are often disregarded. The next section discusses strategies to address these issues.

4.2 Strategies toward Improving Literacy

Table 2. Strategies toward improving literacy

	Strategies	Number of countries
1	Teacher/facilitator training	19
2	Improvement of monitoring and evaluation system	16
2	Enhancing political commitment and advocacy	16
2	Improvement of coordination and management mechanisms	16
5	Establishment and improvement of infrastructure	14
6	Review and implementation of policies on NFE	13
7	Institutional capacity building	12
7	Improvement of partnerships	12
9	Development and provision of literacy materials	10
10	Mobilization of resources	9
11	Improving female literacy	6
12	Promotion of national and local languages	5
12	Developing research programs and data bases	5

Strategies are planned and in some cases implemented in order to address the literacy challenges stated in the action plans. In response to insufficient quality teachers and facilitators, 19 out of 28 countries noted that teacher/facilitator training will be the top priority in their strategies. The Senegalian government, for example, is developing “a reference framework for training nonformal education teachers.” Yemen appears to be engaged in capacity development of “about one thousand teachers and inspectors annually” whereas “2,500 teachers for mass literacy, non-formal and community-based education in

13 districts” have been trained in Sierra Leone. Improvement of monitoring and evaluation systems (16/28) also corresponds to the challenge of the lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms cited in the previous section. In Niger, “tools for monitoring and evaluation of LNFE [literacy and nonformal education] projects and programs will be designed and implemented by different actors.” Chad trains “personnel in charge of monitoring and evaluation” on literacy programs.

Enhancing political commitment and advocacy is key to improving literacy (16/28). In Rwanda, government officials intend to raise

political awareness through the mass media. The government of Mozambique also reports to “mobilize and sensitize all stakeholders to ensure the participation of an increasing number of learners in Literacy and Adult Education programs.” The action plan of Guinea Bissau reports that the use of various channels of information and communication for a public awareness campaign will disclose the activities toward the elimination of illiteracy and education.

Many countries regard the improvement of coordination and management mechanisms (16/28) as a means of improving literacy. The government of Senegal, for example, recognizes the importance of the “reinforcement of capacities [of coordinators] for nonformal education management.” In Yemen, “efforts of various governments and non-governmental institutions to participate in achieving literacy objectives have been mobilized and coordinated.” The government of Iraq promotes “cooperation and coordination among the various public, national, and private sectors, and to combine their efforts to achieve a society that is free of illiteracy.”

Establishment and improvement of infrastructure is essential to make literacy programs more accessible (14/28). In Eritrea, they open “more community reading rooms to promote habit of reading and self-learning among the population (to create a literate environment).” Some governments set numerical objectives in improving infrastructure. The government of Senegal pursues “acquisition of 7,500 functional spaces (classrooms) for teaching-learning activities” and “the endowment of desks and benches for 4,500 constructed spaces.” Pakistan appears to establish “40 000 adult literacy centers, 100 community learning centers (CLCs) and 100 Quranic literacy centers (QLCs) per year in the 57 districts of the country.”

Review and implementation of policies on NFE (13/28) is crucial to improve literacy. In Pakistan, for example, “the National Framework of Action and Strategic Literacy Plans has been prepared by the National Commission for Human Development.” In Yemen, “the Literacy Mid-Term plan is being implemented as part of Medium Term Results Framework 2013-2015.” As the review of the NFE monitoring and evaluation framework, In Gambia, government officials intend to align “the program objectives and activities with development policies and frameworks such as the national program for accelerated growth and employment.”

Institutional capacity building (12/28) is considered essential to improve literacy. The government of Niger focuses on “strengthening the capacity of DGAENF [Ministry of Basic and Literacy Education] executives and providers.” Benin is engaged in “capacity building of the various actors in the literacy sub-sector.” The government of Mozambique strengthens “institutional and organizational capacity for effective implementation of adult literacy education activities.”

Improvement of partnerships (12/28) are mentioned as prioritized strategies by many countries. In Benin, for example, government officials make efforts to ensure “strengthening the involvement of private providers.” The action plan of Guinea Bissau reports to improve “quality of literacy and adult education in partnerships with different sectors” including partners such as NGOs. In Gambia, stakeholders integrate “the public-private-sector partnership approach into the mainstream plan” by involving “stakeholders and adapting a participatory program planning and implementation procedures.” The Pakistani government promotes “involvement of provincial stakeholders” essential to strengthen “coordination, liaison, mobilization and capacity building of the provincial stakeholders including

provincial departments and ministers, donor agencies, NGOs, and philanthropists.”

Development and provision of literacy materials (10/28), along with teacher training and establishment of infrastructure, feeds into the improvement of literacy programs. Benin produces “training materials (teaching aids) while Rwanda more widely distributes pedagogical and learning materials.”

Nine countries mentioned mobilization of resources as a strategy (9/28). In India, for example, “in order to provide academic resources in the support of literacy and adult education programs, State Resource Centers (SRCs) have been established throughout the country.” The action plan of Mozambique reports to “establish the National Funds for Literacy and Non-Formal Education” for “identification, mapping and mobilization of potential donors (public and private companies, civil society, etc.)” to raise funds for literacy.

Quite a few countries focus on improving female literacy (6/28). In Benin, “incentives for women on the basis of merit” have been introduced for “development and implementation of a [literacy] program to strengthen the capacity of girls and women involved in micro-enterprises.” In Yemen, “Basic and female training centers have been rehabilitated and provided with modern equipment.”

Five countries find important promotion of national and local languages (5/28) rather than official languages. The government of Sierra Leone prioritizes “development, adaptation, testing, printing and distribution of teaching and learning materials in five Sierra Leonean languages.” The government of Burkina Faso seems to have a concrete policy in “promotion of national languages by making available authors of quality didactic material, the effective implementation of editorial policy, the pursuit of subsidized national language newspapers, the

adoption of a linguistic policy allowing the use of national languages in administration, commerce and the development of capacity-building programs for the newly literate.” The government of Senegal supports “Regional Councils in the elaboration of their development and literacy plans and national languages” such as “the elaboration of an action plan for introducing bilingualism in school” and “newspaper production in national languages.”

Also, five countries report to be developing research programs and data bases (5/28) to deal with statistics issues. The government of Sierra Leone, for example, “supports national literacy survey on literacy levels of the population.” The action plan of Papua New Guinea states that “research needs to be carried out to develop and maintain an accurate picture of what literacy activities are carried out at the national, provincial, district and local levels.” The Eritrean plan reports to develop “adult and non-formal education data base system (documentation and publication).”

The strategies commonly employed to address literacy challenges are: teacher/facilitator training; improvement of monitoring and evaluation system; enhancing political commitment and advocacy; and improvement of coordination and management mechanisms. Institutional capacity building, ranked 7th, is related to teacher/facilitator training, the most commonly cited strategy because institutional support is essential for individual training. Improvement of partnerships, also ranked 7th, is also part of that of coordination mechanisms, ranked 2nd. Mobilization of resources are ranked 10th, but is also related to enhancing political commitment and advocacy, ranked 2nd. Developing and provision of literacy materials are essential for improving literate environments that require review and implementation of literacy and nonformal education policies. Establishment and

improvement of infrastructure serve for narrowing the regional and gender disparities. Relevant strategies combined, institutional and individual (e.g., teachers, facilitators) capacity development is the top priority strategy followed by improvement of coordination and partnerships mechanisms, enhancing political commitment and resource mobilization, review and implementation of literacy policies, and then improvement of monitoring and evaluation systems.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper reviewed progress in adult literacy since the 2000 Dakar Forum and challenged articulated in the previous literature. This paper then analyzed challenges and strategies in 28 countries' action plans submitted to the 2012 High-Level International Round Table for Literacy. The findings show that the issues most commonly cited include a lack of financial and human resources, the low quality of literacy programs, and a lack of dedicated commitment to reducing adult literacy, all of which are closely interconnected. The lack of financial and human resources affect negatively the quality of education as it also indicates a lack of technical resources. Insufficient financial, human, and technical resources arguably stem from the lack of commitment. Many other literacy issues are related to these three. For instance, wide regional disparity and weak institutional capacity, both of which are the fourth most commonly cited issues, often derive from a lack of financial, human, and technical resources.

These challenges are addressed through strategies in the action plans submitted to UNESCO. Teacher/facilitator training was placed as the top priority followed by enhancing a political commitment, improving monitoring and evaluation systems, and establishing

coordination mechanisms. These issues are also closely related each other: Teacher/facilitator training requires funding, which also requires political commitment while advocacy is essential to motivate adult learners. Monitoring and evaluation systems and coordination mechanisms are also important to assess the literacy programs, avoid overlapping literacy activities, seeking and/or spending funding effectively.

Both the challenges and the strategies in the action plans suggest the significance of a political commitment and the subsequent action, which seem to have a huge impact on mobilizing financial, human, and technical resources; however it is difficult to promote adult literacy, compared to some other EFA goals such as universal primary education and to a lesser extent gender equality. Policy makers know what primary education is or at least how it looks like, if nothing else, from their experiences of having gone to school themselves. The image of a poor rural girl wishing to go to school, for example, has been popularly used by development organizations in an attempt to attract investment in education (Heyneman 2009). The image of adult illiterates, on the other hand, is perhaps less appealing. Virtually no policy makers, including policy makers, have been illiterate adults. Few have actually been directly involved in adult literacy programs. Thus, adult illiteracy may be difficult for them to identify with, lessening their personal empathy with it. Indeed, most governments invest very little on adult education, including adult literacy training. One may argue that they may be simply following the logic of the market: investment in adult literacy can be wasteful without corresponding returns. One intellectual, for example, told me that the reason that adult literacy "is not seen as important as primary school is a simple matter of economics: unlike adults, children have an entire lifetime to

contribute to their country's economy, so they may be viewed as 'worth' more of an investment. Also, some may assume that if adults have gotten this far without a literacy program, they can do fine without it and there is thus no real need for it" (personal communication). This view may be shared by many others, including policy makers.⁴

Many of us EFA stakeholders seem to appreciate the idea that everyone should be provided opportunities to learn to be literate, but we do not seem to be convinced to the extent that we take further actions. The 2011 GMR (UNESCO 2011: 7) asserts, "When political leaders do acknowledge the need to tackle illiteracy, swift progress is possible." I argue, however, that commitment to literacy will not be made prior to convincing ourselves first of its real importance of why national governments need to spend more on literacy by demonstrating how programs will be implemented and what the consequences and returns will be for their respective countries. By the same token, we might educate illiterates on what they stand to gain through literacy training. Otherwise, neither governments nor illiterates will likely invest more of their own time, energy, and limited resources into gaining literacy. Convincing governments and adult learners of the significance of literacy should be possible if literacy is truly essential for a better life.

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⁴ This statement has two possible limitations. First, this does not fully explain why pre-primary school enrolment has been stagnant. If time is the most crucial factor for longer and higher returns, stakeholders and governments would have invested more in early childhood education. Yet, pre-primary education enrolment remains low at 48% in 2010 (UNESCO, 2012). This statement also disregards the benefits of educating adults for the benefits of educating children. According to UNESCO (2011), literate parents, especially mothers, tend to send their children to school more than non-literate parents.

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